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Legislators seek improved water service

Projects in budget will help more than 700,000 households



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FRANKFORT, Ky. -- About 30,000 Kentucky households will get treated water for the first time as the General Assembly, addressing a long-standing problem in rural areas, approved financing for 267 water and sewer projects.

An additional 700,000 households will get improved water service under the plan.

More than 10 percent of Kentuckians get water from wells and other untreated sources, and many who have public water service have low pressure and other problems, according to the state's water resource development plan.

The water projects, costing an estimated \$377 million, will go to 104 counties. The state budget passed last week allocates \$10 million -- \$5 million each from coal-severance taxes and tobacco-settlement payments -- to finance \$114 million in bonds. Federal and local money also will be used.

Senate President David Williams and House budget committee Chairman Harry Moberly said the effort represents a new legislative commitment to make treated water available to virtually every Kentucky household sooner than the 2020 goal the General Assembly and Gov. Paul Patton set three years ago.

"It's a long-term, public policy decision that we'll try to continue," Moberly said.

For now it's mostly water, but "if we get these waterlines, the next thing we do is pick up on the sewers," Williams said.

The Patton administration official who oversees the plan for water resource development helped legislators choose the projects. But Moberly conceded there were political considerations because the projects were selected on a district-by-district basis rather than on statewide need.



Senate President David Williams, above, and Rep. Harry Moberly said the water projects represent a new legislative commitment.



The senate district of Williams, R-Burkesville, received more funding than any other, but Democrats weren't shut out. The districts of four Eastern Kentucky Democratic senators -- Walter Blevins, Johnny Ray Turner, Daniel Mongiardo and Ray Jones -- were approved for 16 projects totaling nearly \$25 million.

Williams said decisions on what to include were made collectively.

"It's a long-term, public policy decision that we'll try to continue."

Moberly, D-Richmond, said budget negotiators tried to include a project for every county that wasn't excluded for other reasons -- urban areas like Louisville that already have nearly universal water service, and the Jackson Purchase in Western Kentucky, which received funding for a regional industrial park. Moberly said coal money was used only in coal counties, and tobacco money was used elsewhere.

-Rep. Harry Moberly, chairman of the House budget committee, speaking of the water projects

Williams' tobacco-dependent 16th District also includes two coal counties, McCreary and Whitley. Whitley County, the district's most populous county and the one farthest from Williams' hometown, is to get more bond money than any other county -- nearly \$5.8 million. Of that, \$3 million is for a new water plant to serve the county seat of Williamsburg.

After Williams' district, the secondlargest bond amount, nearly \$11.8 million, is going to the 25th District of Sen. Robert Stivers, R-Manchester, the budget negotiator who oversaw the allocation of coal-severance-tax money. His home county of Clay is to get \$3.3 million.

"I think my actions were appropriate," Stivers said. "I have the biggest geographic district in the state, and I have the most impoverished Senate district" with five of the nation's poorest counties -- Clay, Lee, Magoffin, Owsley and Wolfe.

Stivers said no legislator's request was turned down, and when negotiators finished there was about \$6.6 million in bond capacity available.

Stivers said \$1 million each was allocated to Breathitt and Knott counties in the district of Turner, the Democratic caucus chairman. And Williams noted that Mongiardo, D-Hazard, a frequent critic of the Senate president, got \$6.6 million for his district.

Williams also said his final allocations included \$790,000 for water and sewer service for a new Whitley County jail and \$80,000 for a McCreary County industrial park that also got help from another pool of severancetax money, allocated county by county on the basis of coal production.

He said when that pool is included, several other districts received more money than his. "My district does not fall appreciably out of line with similar districts as far as the amount of projects that are being done," Williams said.

Because of the county pool, coalcounty legislators are familiar with putting water projects in the budget. Tobacco-county lawmakers and budget negotiators were guided by Roger Recktenwald, the executive director of the Kentucky Infrastructure Authority.

Recktenwald spent 18 hours discussing projects with lawmakers during the final weekend before the budget was passed. He said about one-third of the projects approved in tobacco counties, and about one-fifth of those in coal counties, weren't in his agency's extensive database of projects that had been proposed by utilities, and that much time was spent on the telephone getting information from utilities.

But asked how closely the selections reflect the needs of the state, Recktenwald said, "We think they are pretty daggone close."

Moberly said he expects water projects in the next budget will be discussed early and in the open.

"We need to do more work on it," he said.

Moberly and Williams said the issue didn't arise until the end of budget discussions because the House had no projects in its version of the budget.

Moberly said that the plan to put money into water projects was popular with coal-county legislators but "a lot less" so with tobacco-county lawmakers, who want to ensure that half of the state's tobacco-settlement money is spent on agricultural projects, a policy set by the legislature in 2000.

Some counties with little dependency on the crop got water projects funded with tobacco-settlement money.

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